

# History

## The history of writing

### Learning objectives

- The students learn the history and purpose of writing. They also learn about how alphabet systems evolved gradually from visual representations (basically pictures) to abstract systems, such as are used in most alphabets today, where an individual sign typically has no visual relationship to something in the real world.
- In the project stage, they use this information to research the history of an alphabet.

### Useful vocabulary

characters (in writing)   clay tablets   consonants  
hieroglyphics   vowels

### Preparation

*The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* by David Crystal has a detailed and fascinating section on writing and alphabets.

### Warmer

Write this sentence on the board: *The amazing ex-British queen can speak two different languages very well.*  
Ask the students which letter of the alphabet is not used in the sentence (j).  
Give them three minutes to make a grammatical sentence which uses as many of the alphabet letters as possible. See which group has the best sentence.

- 1 Ask the students *Which is more difficult for you in English, writing or speaking? What makes writing difficult?* Elicit the idea that spelling is often difficult because writing has changed over a long time. Give examples of words with silent letters in English, like (k)now and t(w)o – originally the silent letters were pronounced. Ask if they have seen any examples of something from their country written 500 or 1000 years ago. Can they read and understand it? Are any words pronounced in the same way?  
  
Point out that humans have been able to speak for about 100,000 years but writing systems didn't begin until much later, when communities became larger and more complex. Arrange the students into groups to answer the questions. If they don't know the answers, encourage them to speculate.

- 2 Ask the students to give you examples of consonants (for example, k, s) and vowels (for example, a, o).

The students read the text and check their answers to Exercise 1.

### Answers

- 1 About 5,000 years ago.
- 2 They needed it to do business, first for writing numbers when they were buying and selling animals and food.
- 3 It probably began in Sumeria (now Iraq) and Egypt.
- 4 Early writing had pictures to represent words.
- 5 *Students' own answers.* English uses the Roman alphabet.

### Extension activity

Put these reasons for writing on the board and get the students to think of examples from things they have written recently.

*To get/give information* (e.g. a text message about meeting a friend)

*To remember things* (e.g., a shopping list)

*For fun* (e.g. filling in a crossword or sudoku)

Can the students think of any more reasons for writing and examples?

- 3 Ask the students what they think people used to write with? Can they tell from the pictures on the right-hand page?

Ask the students to answer the questions in pairs and then compare as a class.

Ask them how easy they think their writing system is for foreigners to learn.

### Fast finishers

Ask the students to work out these (not real) words if water is 'fi' and house is 'wo'.

lu-fi (man water)	Answer: crying
wo-ka (house mouth)	Answer: door
fi-wo (water house)	Answer: boat

### Suggested answer

- 1 The Chinese alphabet has over 3,000 characters and so is probably one of the hardest to learn and use.
- 2 Phoenician is probably the easiest as it only has 22 letters to learn.

### Extension activity

The students have a written conversation. Put the students into pairs and set a time limit, say five minutes. The first student writes something on a piece of paper and passes it to their partner. This person responds and passes the paper back and so on. There can be no talking during this time. You could also do this by text messaging rather than paper. Afterwards, ask the students how it felt compared to a normal conversation; were there any advantages, for example more time to think about a response?

- 4 Ask the students what is unusual about these sentences. (There are no vowels.)

Tell the students to read them and say which words are easy and difficult.

### Answers

- 1 My favourite sport is football.
- 2 Can you come with out with me this afternoon?
- 3 When is your birthday?

- 5 Write 'm n nglish tchr' on the board and see if the students can work out the sentence. (I am an English teacher.)

Tell them to write at least three sentences with only consonants. Then arrange them into pairs to read each other's sentences and say which words are difficult.

- 6 Ask the students to think of examples when we use pictures not words (for example, maps, signs, emoticons, art).

Tell the students to work out the meaning of the pictures.

### Answers

- 1 Cross the road here.
- 2 restaurant
- 3 lift / US elevator
- 4 I'm happy/sad.

### Extension activity

The students draw a picture for the other students to work out the meaning.

### Subject learning

In the next stage, the students are going to find out more about an alphabet. Encourage a class discussion on what they have learned so far. If appropriate, do this in the students' own language. Use these questions:

Why is writing important?

What did the first alphabets look like?

Name some different types of alphabet.

What kind of alphabet do we use in our language?

Do you think our alphabet might change in the future?

### Project

- Tell the students they are going to find out about an alphabet and present the information to the rest of the class.
- Arrange them into pairs and tell them to choose an alphabet. It could be an alphabet used today like American Sign Language, an old one like Runic or even a fantasy language like J.R.R. Tolkien's Elven.
- The students find out the information outside class and put it together as a presentation in class.
- The students present their alphabet in class and answer questions from the other students. They also make a short quiz, giving some words or symbols and asking what they mean or how they sound, perhaps offering multiple choice options. For example (Greek):  
Is Δ pronounced:  
A /d/  
B /f/  
C /w/  
(Answer: A)

### Cooler

Write some old SMS messages on the board (from the early days of texting) for the students to work out.

CU later.	See you later.
RU OK?	Are you OK?
PLZ TXT	Please text.
B4 2day	Before today
Dont B L8	Don't be late.
Up 2U	It's up to you.
ORLY	Oh really?